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promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which re in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; rovide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE MISSION OF THE RURAL CHURCH

By William G. Mather*

The mission of the rural church is the same as that of the church everyre -- the bringing of the Gospel of Jesus into all the world. The Gospel is the e -- the story, the news, of the life of Jesus among men, the things He did and d, with the purpose that men might know Him and having known Him, love Him and ome changed into better men. The rural field is just one part of the world into ch this good news must be carried.

The Gospel is universal. Its core, its basic teaching, is the same in y and country, in Timbuctoo and Stoney Lonesome. It works the same miracle of nge in the hearts of young and old, wise and foolish, rich and poor. But if the rch would have that Gospel understood by the folks in Stoney Lonesome it must l it in a language different from that it would use in Timbuctoo; and when that pel is accepted by a demure and shy farm girl in her earliest teens -- and there such -- the meaning of the miracle of a changed life is different from its actance by a city derelict.

Basic Task

The mission of the rural church then is to carry the universal Gospel to al people in the language that will make it understood by rural people.

The good news of Jesus Christ is not only universal in its content but it t be universal in its outreach. It was so intended. "Go ye into <u>all</u> the world." is not enough to set up a building at the crossroads and wait for the people to e down from the hills and up from the river bottoms. The Gospel is not fitted h rockers like Aunt Mary's favorite chair -- it has <u>feet</u>. "<u>Go</u> ye into all the ld." The going is quite different where people are crowded together ten thousand the square mile and where they are spread out thinly among the cornfields or ttered in small handfuls among the mountain coves.

The mission of the rural church then is to make sure that an understande Gospel is really carried to <u>all</u> the rural people -- that there are no bare spots

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n address delivered before the National Planning Conference for Northern Baptist rches in Town and Country, at Green Lake, Wisconsin, July 1948. Dr. Mather is fessor of Rural Sociology at Pennsylvania State College. Used with the kind persion of Dr. Mather and of Dr. Mark Rich, Secretary for Town and Country Work of Northern Baptist Church.

where the seed has not been sown, no classes of people who have been missed or excluded.

No Easy Mission

That is no easy mission. The rural pastor must know as many people as th census taker and as many feet of road as the highway supervisor and as many ways of saying the same thing as there are varieties of people and kinds of workers and states of soul in his parish.

The task is much more difficult than it was 75 to 200 years ago when most of our rural churches were founded.

The parish then was small, for the rural settlements were of but a few farmers on the best land and a few houses at the crossroads, with forest or prairie in between. Within that little settlement people lived most of their lives. They grew their crops and had the grain ground at the local water-driven mill. They raised their cows and hogs and sheep, which gave them milk and meat and cloth. Within the narrow circle of the "team haul," within the sound of the church bell, folks were born and reared, fell in love and married, bore and reared their children, and at the last died and were buried. Every one knew every one else within the neighborhood, and those beyond the neighborhood touched it so rarely that they mattered little. Time ran like a quiet river through the lives of men and through the life of the village.

The Changing Rural Scene

There came a day when the good land was settled full by the large familie of the pioneers; when the forests in between the settlements were cut away and rafted down streams that even then were drying up as the cover was denuded from their watersheds; when the acid stump land was put to the plow and the sod of the prairie was broken up and people swarmed like locusts over all the land and, like locusts, devoured its fatness.

Mills and stores and taverns and schools and churches multiplied with the people and with the cleared land, and then there was room for no more. The river of time was full.

And then the richness of the soil on the hills was bleached out and the black soil of the broken plains began to blow away and the steam turbines of the city factories with their great automatic machines made the water wheels of the local mi obsolete. Farms were abandoned, mill ponds silted up, whole villages died. Paved roads and fast cars and trucks, newspapers, moving pictures, the radio, brought the life of distant metropolises -- garish, hard, ruthless -- into every hamlet. The ri er of time had overflowed its banks.

It is in this flood time that we live today. The old is going and the ne is not yet here, and the rural church is tossing with the current quite like the mi and the store and the school. Because of this, more than ever before, the people need the Gospel, and the rural church dare not fail them either through ignorance o poverty or cowardice.

Shifting Populations

There has been a great shifting of population, and in the milling of huma

y many persons are lost to the eyes of rural shepherds. One of the first steps e church must take is the finding of the people.

Every year over a million persons leave the farm for villages, cities, and wns; every year six to eight hundred thousand persons leave the villages, cities, d towns for the farms. The farms have been losing population in this exchange ever nce 1920 with the exception of the depression period, and during the war they lost ve million of whom perhaps two million have since been regained. We have twenty-ven and a half million farmers now; we had thirty-two million in 1935; we may have lly twenty-four million in 1975.

The total rural population has increased, however, by the growth of popu-tion in villages and the increase of nonfarming people in the open country. This ral-nonfarm population grew from 20.2 million in 1920 to an estimated 31.0 million 1947.

A movement from place to place within the rural areas accompanies the move-nt between farms and cities. Modern rural people are much more mobile than has en commonly assumed. In February of 1946, 12.8 per cent of the heads of farm fami-es lived in a different state or county from that in which they had lived in April 1940. For the rural nonfarm families the percentage was 18.6, exceeding the urban te of 15.5.

reached Farm People

If it were said that people got lost from the church in the city's teaming reets, it would be readily believed. It is harder to believe that people get lost om the church in the country lanes -- but they do. We are completing at The Penn-lvania State College a study of the churches that serve the farmers in 27 sample ral agricultural townships. The number of names on the church rolls was only 44.5 r cent of the population; for the United States as a whole it is 53 per cent.

The number of church members reported by the pastors of the rural churches living on farms was 34 per cent of the population living on farms (1940 Census); e number of church members reported by the pastors as not living on farms was 52.6 r cent of the village and nonfarm open country population. Evidently the rural urches of Pennsylvania have not reached the farmer as they should.

It is not because there are not enough churches, for the study found one urch to each 259 people with an average membership of 115. It may have been due rtly to the fact that of the 121 churches in the townships studied 63, or over lf, were located in incorporated boroughs all of less than 1,000 population. As know, each borough or village is surrounded by a farm trade area about equal in pulation but of several square miles in extent -- and it may be that these rural urches did not cover their areas, did not serve their whole parishes as thorough-as they might.

The rural church must find the people if it is to fulfill its mission. It st determine the area of its responsibility and look after the sheep in the back sture as well as those in the barnyard.

ral Church Must Serve All People

It must seek out the people of all kinds within that area. There <u>are</u> dif-rent kinds of people there now, as the tides of migration sweep to and fro through

the rural community. While some communities have lost population, many close to ci ties, or where rural industrialization has been spreading, have gained nonfarming populations. One township in Connecticut was found to have 80 per cent of its fami lies former city residents. In Pennsylvania rural areas there are two nonfarmers for every farmer; in the United States as a whole the ratio is one to one. Often the same rural church, whether in village or open country, must serve both.

There has long been misunderstanding and suspicion between rural and urba people, and to a lesser degree between farmers and nonfarmers in the rural area. T spread of rural electrification, the improvement of rural schools, and the raising of farm incomes are helping to bring about similar levels of living and are thus le sening some of the difference between farmers and nonfarmers. But the basic fact r mains that each produces what the other uses and wants to sell high and buy low. They are very conscious of competition. It is also true that some farm communities are a little slow to accept newcomers into their circle of friendliness, and that some newcomers from the cities are not accustomed to neighboring and are stand-offi in their turn. At any rate, there is common complaint among rural pastors of the difficulty in bringing these newcomers into the church.

In rural Wilton, Connecticut, less than half of the householders belonged to a church when the university sociologist made a survey in the late thirties; of those who did, 5 out of 8 did not belong to churches in the township. The percenta of local church membership dropped from 30 per cent of the households started in Wi ton to 10 per cent of those who had moved there within the preceding 8 years.

A similar situation has been found in a recent study of Webster, New York There a leading layman of a church 60 per cent farm said:

"Of course we want to see our church prosper and grow, but it's mighty hard to wel- come city people. Ours is a farmer's church and we're all alike. Now if the city folk come -- and they are welcome, of course -- why we just naturally can't help fe ing that they're different. After all, you like to be with people you're like -- n body can blame you for that, it's just human nature."

Human nature it may be, but meanwhile God's off-color sheep from the city are not fed.

There are other groups within the reach of the rural church that are not being cared for -- the tenant and the laborer. All studies reveal a much lower pro portion of church membership, and of church activity on the part of those who are members, among these classes within the rural community. In the city the same is true but there the family of lower income can often find fellowship in a church mad up of others of its kind, while in the rural community, already perhaps overchurche if it cannot find religious fellowship with the owner and employing families it can not find it at all.

To the extent that these classes grow in our rural life, and they are gro ing rapidly in certain areas, the church is challenged more and more to fulfill its mission.

What Is Its Message?

Suppose it has determined and covered its area, and, great but unlikely d every one is in the church. What shall its message be? How shall it touch each on so that the healing of the Gospel may do its work for the sickness of each soul? F

ch pastor and each church the answer will be different, but all may be sure that e sickness is there. Perhaps the isolation of the rural community gave it a moral l ethical superiority to the city once upon a time, but that protection is gone w. The only recourse now is that of personal integrity reinforced by the indwelling irit of God.

ed for Personal Integrity

In the rural community today the Pharisee thanks God he is not like city lk, or even as that grocery clerk on Elm Street. The rural dweller comes home from tching pennies, playing bingo, and betting on the spin of the wheel at the local rnival or fair to cluck his tongue over the newspaper expose of a gambling ring in e nearby city.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that urban crimes declined in 7 while rural crimes were still increasing. Juvenile delinquency is not solely urban problem. The recent closing of a rural church of some 200 members in one nnsylvania county was attributed to the difficulty of replacing windows broken by e local youth. Although statistics are hard to get, there is evidence that con-ption of alcoholic beverages is increasing in rural areas, and some local rural ganizations are getting unpleasant local reputations in this regard. These all in-cate the presence of insecurity, of feelings of personal inferiority or inadequacy, strain which is relieved by dangerous means. There are worried, frightened sheep at need the shepherd's touch.

verence for the Land

One of the most basic changes in agricultural rural communities has been e growing commercialization of agriculture, which has resulted in larger but fewer rms operated in a very specialized manner. There has been a decline in the variety things grown on any one farm, and an increase in one-crop farms whose owners prod-e for sale on the market with the intention of making a profit and buying the bulk the family's supplies. The farm becomes a business enterprise, and often the far-r operates it on a short-range policy of overworking the soil for immediate profit the ruin of its value for future generations. Several thousand acres of good land the Cumberland Valley of southern Pennsylvania are worth but little today because such a policy followed by only one man, a so-called successful farmer, who invest-and reinvested his money in farm after farm, put tenants on the land, skimmed off s richness and left the lean residue to his heirs.

When God planted the garden eastward in Eden, He said to Adam whom He put charge, "replenish the earth." That means to fill it up again, not to empty it ; yet according to the Soil Conservation Service the careless methods of some rmers have in the short space of our American life essentially lost to usefulness e-sixth of our tillable land and seriously damaged half of it.

We are careless not only in the way we use the land but also in the way we t it pass from our hands. When a farmer who lives on his land sells it to an ab-ntee owner who will replace him with a transient tenant, or when he has no concern at he be succeeded on the land by a man of church-going habits and Christian char-ter, that farm owner has little regard for the future of his community. Over one-urth of 63 closed Pennsylvania rural churches that were studied last year closed t because of a decline in the <u>number</u> of people in their communities but because of change in the <u>kind</u> of people.

There are careless sheep in the rural pasture that need to be warned that they must account for their stewardship. No man owns the land. He cannot take it with him. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." We are all tenants of the Almighty. A part of the mission of the rural church is to give Christian farmers a respect and reverence for the holy earth.

Unselfish Motives

As farming has become a business, it has become a big business. Last year it was an 18 billion dollar business net, a 34 billion dollar business gross. It is rapidly being organized as a business. Time was when the farmer was a pretty helpless individual in the market, hoodwinked and taken advantage of by the buyers and sellers of his products. Now he has organized himself along the lines of his major specialties, notably in milk, wheat, cotton, tobacco, and citrus fruits. The power of farm cooperatives and farmers' organizations with their legislative representation in Washington is being felt more and more.

To a certain degree that is natural and practical and necessary and desirable. The test comes in the way in which the power of the farmers' organization is used -- whether it is used selfishly or for the common good. Manipulation of market drives to secure special favors for certain farmers by forcing the government to purchase larger quantities of their product for inclusion in the European recovery program; legislative battles between one group of farmers and another seeking to prevent free competition between their products; farm group pressure to restrict international trade for their own narrow benefit; these and other occurrences make the impression that the organized farmer may be no better and no worse than the organized laborer or the organized business man.

There are selfish sheep in the rural pasture. Part of the mission of the rural church is to remind the farmer that he is his brother's keeper, and that the only man Jesus ever called a fool was the farmer who thought that bigger crops and bigger barns would be comforts for his soul.

On the other hand, certain regions where the church serves are places of great rural poverty. Some is due to the wearing out of the soil, some to the exactions of absentee landlords and creditors, some to the lack of knowledge of good farm practice on the part of the farmers, and some to a combination of all these plus other economic and social factors. But the relatively high income of many farmers today should not obscure the fact that in 1945 half the farmers had no demand deposits in banks and no savings bonds; the next year the per capita farm income was only 47 percent of the nonfarm; and year in and year out around a million farm families, usually large ones, have such low income that they hunger and shiver and ail.

There are literally hungry sheep in the rural pasture. One side of the mission of the rural church is to help some farmers to be better farmers so that they can be better men.

A World View

There is another rural need that must be included in the mission of the rural church. When people move in little more than a generation from the small, snug isolation of the old rural neighborhood into such a great and confusing world as our modern one, they have great enlargements of soul to make. In space and time the world is a neighborhood, but practically it is very difficult for rural-reared people to live as if it were. It is hard for every one to know and understand peop

other lands and races and tongues and customs. People who live in the commercial ities have long had acquaintance with such different groups and have learned to get ong with them; rural people have only recently been thrown into such close associa- on. They have not yet learned how to live in the same neighborhood, so to speak, h strangers. The public opinion polls all indicate less knowledge of national and ternational affairs on the part of rural people than of city people. That is quite derstandable, but it is also dangerous. Those attitudes are distinctly in the lux- class today and we cannot afford them. Those attitudes have no place in the heart the Christian, who according to Paul's letter to the Colossians has "put off the l man with his deed and put on the new man . . . where there is neither Greek nor , circumcision or uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free; but Christ all, and in all."

No small part of the mission of the rural church is to lead the flock that too long grazed in the sheltered hollows out upon the broad, high pastures of upper mountains of God.

It will be said that all of this is fantastic because it is beyond the lity of any man to achieve and there is no reason to expect it of rural men. It beyond the ability of men. But it is not beyond the ability of God and it is not ond the ability of men whom God has changed. The rural church has no mission at in the world, no excuse for cluttering the rural landscape, if it is not this: the farmer breaks the field and sows the seed and waits for the wondrous power of l in nature to bring the miraculous changes that unfold the blade and then the ear, the rural church must break open the hearts of the rural people before God that saving love may change them, redeem them, and set them free.

And thus itself like a tree it shows:
That high it reaches, as deep it grows;
And when the storms are its branches shaking,
It deeper root in the soil is taking.

Kristian Ostergaard, 1855-1931
Translated by Jens Christian Aaberg, 1928
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